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Surviving and Thriving as a New Principal: Discussing What It Takes to be a New  
Principal Through a Narrative Approach

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## **Abstract**

One often overlooked aspect of school success and student achievement is the vital role of the school principal. While much of the education reform conversation focuses on topics such as accountability, school-family connections, and individual teacher practices, it is the principal who ultimately impacts each of these areas and who can be the driving force behind school growth. Considering this, current high rates of principal turnover are troubling as this may impact many schools across the country. If a principal is to have a positive impact on a school community, it will take a long-term effort, and for this to happen, we have to ensure that new principals have the right strategies and tools to lay a solid foundation for their work and are able to get off to a great start. This dissertation attempts to add to this discussion by sharing the stories and experience of other principals who have been able to survive and thrive as new principals. The job of a principal is extremely complex, but by using the power of story to provide real, relevant examples of how actual practitioners have done things, we can help to provide new principals a document that they can use to shape their first year on the job. In this dissertation, stories from successful principals have been analyzed and formed into a framework, *The Three S's of New Principal Success: Stakeholders, Systems, and Self*, that is easily remembered and applied.

## **I. Forward**

There are several features of this dissertation that make it slightly different from what may be considered the “traditional” dissertation. Each of these features was made through collaboration with my dissertation committee and chair with the understanding that while these features are different, they hopefully will add relevancy and clarity to the work as a whole.

According to Capella University (Capella University, 2019), “A dissertation is a written document that summarizes research. Initial coursework helps narrow down the research topic and develop it into something that will add to the body of knowledge in the chosen field. Sometimes the research contributes something entirely new to the field, and other times it expands or deepens previous studies.” This dissertation was written not just to “add to the body of knowledge in a chosen field,” but with a particular audience in mind. In this case, the audience is individuals who are new principals. The hope is that this is a work that could be picked up, read, and used by those who are starting as new principals. Thus, throughout this work, much of it will be written assuming that it is being read by one of these individuals and the use of the pronoun “you” will be common throughout.

Many dissertations also follow a similar structure with regards to the order and the title of each of the chapters. Many will include the following chapters: Introduction, literature review, methodology, findings, analysis and synthesis, and conclusion and recommendation as well as an appendix that may include additional resources and information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Each of these aspects of a dissertation is included in the paper, but the title of the chapters and the order in which the information

is presented is different from the traditional model. This was done to allow for more fluency to the work itself, and again, to also appeal to a specific audience.

The final difference between this dissertation and many others is that this work includes my own experiences and reflections as part of the research. The topic, surviving as a new principal, is something with which I have close, personal experience. This first-hand experience allows me to write and share in a way that is different and more personal than just using only the stories and experiences of others. I am transparent about this in the paper, but also feel that it should be disclosed prior to the beginning of the paper.

## **II. Introduction**

You've done it. You've put in the work. You spent years in the classroom teaching and honing your craft. You joined leadership teams and found roles on district committees. You went to school at night to get your administrative degree and passed your certification test. You've talked with your friends, co-workers, and family and made sure that now was the right time, and it's finally happened, you've received the call, and you have gotten the job. You are the NEW PRINCIPAL!!

Soon after this call, and after the initial excitement, there will undoubtedly be a moment when it will hit. Maybe it comes when you see the nameplate outside of your office. Maybe it's when you get your office set-up and realize that you are now on the inside of the notorious "Principal's Office." Or, more than likely, it's when the new email address kicks in and your inbox gets flooded. Your stomach may sink, your eyes might widen, and your heartbeat potentially will quicken. You're the principal. You are now responsible for potentially hundreds of students, dozens of adults, an entire school

building, and what's more, you aren't just responsible for keeping them safe, but for making sure that everyone learns, grows, and is happy. This is the moment, and you have two choices. You can throw your hands in the air, run screaming from the building, and jump in your car never to return, or you can roll up your sleeves, and for the first time ask yourself a question that will soon become routine and guide you through each day, "Ok, what's next?"

### **The Job of Principal**

Many people are driven to become principals because they have the best of intentions. They hear a *calling*. They want to make a difference for their students, for their school, and ultimately for their community. They sense that they are almost destined to be educators and to help educators be their best. They have a strong sense of duty to do all they can for students, and ultimately, they are seeking the fulfillment of doing something that matters (Swen, 2020). This leads to coming into the job ready to take on the world, and ready for difficult things.

However, being a principal is not an easy job, and it has proven to be a challenge for even the most driven of individuals. The job of the principal is incredibly complex and ever changing (Crow, 2006). School principals play important and varied roles in day-to-day operations. They hire and evaluate teachers, lead professional development, design curriculum, manage discipline, set budgets, manage the physical school facility, and they still have to have time to develop relationships with all of the constituents who populate the school community (students, parents, teachers, school boards, other administrators, community members, etc.). (Miller, 2013)



This is a job that looks different every day, in every school, and in every community. Every principal, and I am sure it will be no different for you, has had a moment where they think, “Oh boy, my administrative degree didn’t prepare me for this.” Given the nature of the job, there is only so much that can be done to prepare someone for this job. Success is hard to determine and can vary depending on the measurements, the district, and the priorities of the school and the community. Because there is no handbook that tells you what to do in every situation to be a great principal, much is left up to the individual on the ground doing the work. (Swen, 2020).

For a new principal, this can be even more overwhelming. Most new principals enter the job having been a teacher and maybe even serving as an assistant principal, but when they enter the job of principal, they find that another level of expectation awaits them. It is not just the increase in responsibility, but the feeling of ultimate responsibility than can be overwhelming (Swen, 2020), and the truth is, until one walks into the Principal’s Office, there is no way to truly understand what all will be asked of you. So, how can you, as a new principal, make sure to create a good first impression and not only survive, but thrive, during your first year (Spillane & Lee, 2014)?

### **Building the Foundation**

It’s reasonable to assume that if you want to be a principal you are doing this because you have heard a calling and have a mission. If you are to achieve this mission and answer this calling, to make a measurable impact, it requires high levels of work over multiple years. This isn’t something that happens overnight (School Leaders Network, 2014), and if a leader is going to be able to last for several years, you will need to get off to a great start (Celoria & Roberson, 2015).

Undoubtedly, most are familiar with the saying, “One doesn’t get a second chance to make a first impression.” But, even the familiarity of this quote doesn’t truly explain the power of the first impression. First impressions are constructed from initial experiences and they are memorable and persistent (Srivastava, Guglielmo, & Beer, 2010). These initial perceptions shape beliefs that that can be difficult to alter, even in light of contradictory new experiences (Gawronski, Rydell, Vervliet, & DeHouwer, 2010). Creating a good first impression can be vital, and when you are the new leader of an organization, such as a principal of a school, this can be even more important.

According to Mineo (2014), “the foundation of a great workplace is created by organizational credibility, respect and fairness, which form the foundation of trust.” At the center of a great workplace is trust. At the head of this organization is generally a leader, or a supervisor, and it is this supervisor that is the most important person in the creation of a successful, trusting organization (Akhtar & Nizam Nazarudin, 2020). A strong leader will need to create and sell a vision, build alignment, and execute a plan with the other members of his or her organization in order to be successful, and without trust, this won’t be possible (Mineo, 2014). Traditionally, we may think that trust is built over time, but new research is actually showing that people are not only capable of determining trust prior to much direct experience with an individual, but are actually biologically built to do so (Holtz, 2013). According to Holtz (2013), “the human brain automatically and subconsciously processes the trustworthiness of others.” For any organization to be successful, there needs to be trust in the leader, and a leader doesn’t have years to build trust, you have to be ready to hit the ground running and be prepared to give people someone to trust.

**Turnover**

Answering the question of how to support and develop new principals cannot come soon enough as one of the often untold stories in the discussion around issues facing our schools is the issue of principal turnover (School Leaders Network, 2014). The principal is second only to a teacher when looking at factors that impact student achievement (Miller, 2013), but the principal also impacts all teachers in the building, so when there is constant flux in the principal role, the impact on teachers and their teaching inevitably is impacted. In many of our schools, this type of principal churn is happening far too often (School Leaders Network, 2014).

Having a sense of stability in the principal position is extremely important for America's public schools to be successful. Unfortunately, for many schools, this is not the case, and in the era of standardized testing, continual reform, and accountability, many schools are seeing principals turning over at an alarming rate (Levin, Scott, Yang, Leung, & Bradley, 2020). The statistics should create a sense of urgency for anyone who cares about our schools. According to a report by the School Leaders Network (2014), almost twenty-five thousand principals, nearly 25%, leave their schools each year. Half of new principals quit before their fourth year, and the problem is even worse for schools in high poverty areas as principals move to schools with less demanding leadership roles that serve more affluent populations (School Leaders Network, 2014). Research indicates that it can take 5-7 years for lasting school improvement to take place, and this type of turnover can require frequent restarts and realignments which impede making real progress (Snodgrass Rangel, 2018).

And these are just the principals who actually end up leaving their school. While nearly 25% leave each year, as many as 42% are thinking about leaving. 32% of all principals are considering a move to a new school, and almost 20% are considering leaving the profession all together (Levin, Scott, Yang, Leung, & Bradley, 2020). Education as whole cannot afford to have this type of turnover and to lose so many who may have once chose the job to answer their personal calling.

If efforts to improve schools are to succeed, it is hard to overstate the importance of retaining strong and stable leadership in each of our schools (Levin, Scott, Yang, Leung, & Bradley, 2020). As Leithwood (2004) states, "...there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst." But, the leaders of our schools are leaving at alarming rates (School Leaders Network, 2014), and we must look at the reasons why and begin to find creative ways to address them. For example, principals report factors such isolation (Bauer & Brazier, 2013), too many demands on their time, stress (Celoria & Roberson, 2015), the complexity of the job (Crow, 2006), and lack of good, meaningful professional development (Levin, Scott, Yang, Leung, & Bradley, 2020) as factors that lead to them leaving the profession. However, research has also shown that coaches (Celoria & Roberson, 2015), meaningful professional networks and professional development, and connections to others who have had similar experiences (Spillane & Lee, 2014) all can help to mitigate some of the difficulties.

### **The question**

The job is hard, complex, and ever changing. The job is also extremely important for the success of our students and our communities. It is a job that is chosen by driven individuals, such as yourself, who want to make a difference, but far too many of them are leaving the profession each year, and this turnover is causing a significantly negative impact on far too many of our schools. However, there are principals who make it. There are principals who last through their first year and beyond. What is it that they know? What did they do that helped them to overcome their hurdles and to find ways to continue the pursuit of their mission? In short, the purpose of this paper is to answer the following:

*How have principals successfully navigated their first year at a new school?*

### **Answering the question**

In a job and a world that are full of complexities, I am happy to say that I feel that the answer to this the question, can best be explained very simply. A new principal can successfully navigate their first year at a new school by keeping their focus on **The 3 S's of New Principal Success: Stakeholders, Systems, and Self**. The research, the stories, and the framework behind each of these three words is shared in great detail throughout the remainder of this work, but at the end of the day it can be distilled into a focus on the people that matter (stakeholders), the management structures that keep things in order (systems), and knowing your own strengths, weaknesses, and what you need in order to be your best (self). These 3 S's are the key. They provide a simple framework for achieving success in an endeavor that combines both a challenging job, a principal, and a challenging situation, being new. Being a principal is hard, and being new at a job is

hard, so being a new principal is exceptionally difficult, but having a framework can make it all seem more manageable.

Knowing the 3 S's is just the start, but to have faith in this approach, it is important to understand both the foundation upon which they are built and to think through a context of how they can be applied. These 3 S's were not just pulled out of thin air, but built through the combination of the experiences of people who have been there before and been successful, and by looking at the research of what all is entailed in a comprehensive view of being a principal.

There is also a major gap in materials that are available to help a new principal prepare for their position. Although there is a general consensus that school leaders matter (Branch, Rivkin, & Hanushek, 2013), and that there is an extremely high cost for principal turnover (School Leaders Network, 2014), the amount of literature and helpful writings that exist to support a new principal are fairly slim. Much the material that does exist is a short, numbered list (Borelli, 2007), a list of "rules" (Curtis, 2004), or what feels like a to-do list which makes no attempt to connect to the real-world context of the job (Rooney, 2013). While these can be helpful and mention many great tips, they can be hard to connect with and thus are difficult to apply to the job due to the lack of a context that they provide.

The job of the principal can be lonely (Bauer & Brazer, 2013), and it is helpful to hear the stories of others who have been in your shoes and have walked the same path as a new principal may be preparing to venture down. The power of stories can allow us to both respect new principals time in the building and also build meaningful connections to others who have been there before. According to Vanessa Boris of Harvard Business

Publishing, “Good stories do more than create a sense of connection. They build familiarity and trust, and allow the listener to enter the story where they are, making them more open to learning” (Boris, 2017). My goal is to use the stories of experienced principals during their time as new principals, to help guide a successful path for both future and current principals who are, or will be, serving a new school as principal. Through the use of first hand stories of successes and mistakes, I am hoping to create avenues for connection that will allow new education leaders, such as yourself, to forge a path in their own context, and to learn from a community of others who have been there before.

The challenge with this approach is to strike the correct balance. Too many people telling stories can lead to broad generalities and can be hard for any one individual to identify with. If there are not enough stories, then there is a risk that one may not hear a voice that sounds and feels like their own. To this end, I have interviewed a diverse group of principals who have worked, or who are currently working, in a variety of locations (urban, suburban, rural, etc). I am using a limited number, five, in order to capitalize on the success of coaching models (Celoria & Roberson, 2015), and in the hope of being able to go deeper into the experiences of each principal. This group of participants will also consists of principals who have served at more than one school, and will have the ability to discuss being new from a variety of experiences and perspectives. This unique perspective of transitioning into a school as the new principal can also allow for them to talk about how they may have done certain things differently the second time around.

Given the wide variety of state systems, principal development programs, and individual district approaches, I have found that it is more reasonable to use one state a model and then attempt to focus on one state and one system where the turnover rate is similar to the average of the country. Due to its similarities to the numbers of the nation as a whole, I have chosen to focus on the state of Missouri. The principal turnover rate in Missouri is almost identical to that of the nation (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Missouri also has a wide variety of schools with a balance in the state of districts located in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The other factor in deciding to look more deeply at the state of Missouri has to do with efforts that they are beginning to undertake which are looking at stemming the tide of principal turnover. In the last few years, Missouri has begun a program that is focused on supporting principals and their development. This program is known as the Missouri Leadership Development System (MLDS) (Rutherford, Gregory, Katnik, & Shellinger, 2016).

After collecting the information through the interview process, the experiences and the stories will be shared through a context that focuses on the different aspects of a principal's role in a way that allows for a connection and easy application to the context of any new principal as they begin their journey. The MLDS format has identified a set of competencies for the Emerging Level Principal, defined as a principal in his or her first or second. Therefore, the focus of this work will be on creating a format that shares the stories and the experiences of principals in a way that also addresses each of the necessary competencies of an Emerging Level Principal (Appendix B.4).

We all know the importance of our education system and what it means for our communities and our society. Our principals are an invaluable piece of this system, but



they are turning over for to frequently, and it is having an impact on our schools.

Supporting new principals through their first few years can be invaluable to helping keep principals in their school and to building stability in our school system. In order to do this, we must share the experiences of others who have been there before and allow for new principals add their own bricks to the path that has been forged by others. It is important that we share how principals have survived and even thrived during their first year on the job. But, before we can do that, we need to have our “why”, a deep understanding of the issue (principal turnover) we are facing and our “what”, a full understanding of what constitutes the job of principal.

### **III. The Why and the What**

It may seem almost intuitive, but the role of the principal is extremely important to the success of our schools. According to a report by the Wallace Foundation about the importance of school leadership, Leithwood (2004) states, “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (p. 5). In many ways, as goes the principal, so goes the school.

The role of the principal is diverse and will impact all areas of a school community. In a blog post for *Education Week*, University of Missouri professor Todd Whitaker (2011) notes, “when the principal sneezes, the whole school catches a cold” (p. 30). In this quote Whitaker shows that much in the way a teacher can impact a single classroom, the principal impacts the entire school. The way in which they lead and develop the teachers will impact the classrooms. The way in which they approach and maintain relationships with students sets the tone for how all should relate to one another, and the way in which they communicate and build rapport and trust with the parents and

the community goes a long way towards building successful partnerships that extend beyond the walls of the school. The principal's job is one that is complex and looks different each and every day, but it is also one that has a meaningful impact on the success of a school (Branch, Rivkin, & Hanushek, 2013).

### **Why: Principal Turnover: A High Cost to the System**

Finding, hiring, and supporting principals is incredibly important for any successful school system. As Mitgang (2008) notes, "Pick the right school leader and great teachers will come and stay. Pick the wrong one and, over time, good teachers leave, mediocre ones stay, and the school gradually, or not so gradually, declines. Reversing the impact of a poor principal can take years" (p. 3). Schools make an incredible investment into principals, and it is vital that they look for ways to ensure that new principals are supported so that they can succeed both now and in the future. However, recent looks into principal turnover rates show that not enough is being done.

Principals are leaving schools at a fairly alarming rate. More than 20% of public school principals leave their jobs from one year to the next. Only half of newly hired principals will still be at their current schools after four years, and less than 30% stay beyond year five (Miller, 2013). When principals leave, it can have a lasting impact. According to Miller (2013), it can be quite common to find "...that test scores in the first two years of the new principal's tenure are low relative to both school performance under the old principal and to subsequent school performance under the new principal" (p. 62). Essentially, it takes some time for a new principal to come in and for the system to adjust before it is able to level out and return to the mean.

It's not just the cost to student achievement that is impacted by principal turnover, but it is also a significant cost to the financial situation of a district. Bringing in a new principal requires a lot of effort on the entire system. There are costs associated with preparing, recruiting, signing, and training a new principal. Then there are costs associated with finding a mentor and working to ensure that they are continually developed and supported. All together it has been found that just hiring a new principal can cost on average \$75,000 (School Leaders Network, 2014), and in days and times when schools are financially strapped, this is quite a significant investment.

If we are to understand how to stop the turnover, we need to first understand why they are leaving. There is no single reason as to why principals leave, and in some cases, they may be leaving satisfied and just taking a new opportunity or even retiring. But, in the majority of cases, principals are leaving unsatisfied (Miller, 2013). There are multiple factors that are leading to this dissatisfaction, but the most frequently mentioned are factors such as overwhelming managerial obligations, long hours, and both local and state policy obstacles. Two other factors that many outgoing principals mention as reasons for their leaving are unmanageable stress and profound isolation (Johnson, 2005). Given the high number of principals who are leaving early in the tenure, the factors that are pushing them out, and the success that some models of support have seen, it is reasonable to assume that supporting new principals with methods that can help them anticipate the factors that they may face and connect to the stories of others who have experienced similar situations could be effective in reducing principal turnover.

**What: Understanding the Role of Principal**

As a principal, one of the most difficult questions for me to answer is, “what do you do all day.” This is a difficult question simply because the truth is that it depends on the day, and, honestly, it could be a little bit of everything. Education leadership expert Michael Fullan (2014) describes the responsibilities of a principal this way, “They are expected to run a smooth school; manage health, safety, and the building; innovate without upsetting anyone; connect with students and teachers; be responsive to parents and the community; answer to their districts; and above all, deliver results” (pg. 6). In order to know “how” to survive as a principal, we must first have common ground on how we are defining and looking at the job itself.

Recently, the state of Missouri partnered with education leadership experts including Mike Rutherford to develop a program to help support and develop school leaders, as a part of this work, the state developed the Missouri Leadership Development System (MLDS). In its executive summary, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) states that the purpose of MLDS is “...to develop and support effective school leaders” (p. 2). At the start of their work, they had to describe each aspect of the role of a principal. They begin by defining five main leadership roles that a principal must assume in order to lead a school effectively (Image 1). These five categories are as follows: a visionary leader, an instructional leader, a managerial leader, a relational leader, and an innovative leader. Each domain may operate on its own, but inevitably there will be times when these categories will overlap and a principal will have to perform roles which require operating within several of these areas at once (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019).

**Image 1 – MLDS: Transformational Principal Categories (Appendix B.1)**

## The **Transformational** Principal is...



The five categories or roles (visionary leader, innovative leader, relational leader, instructional leader, managerial leader) that a principal fulfills are then further explained with a set of competencies for each role. These competencies provide more specificity with regards to the things that an effective school leader must do, but the MLDS system also realizes that principals may be at different levels of ability due to differing amounts

of experience. The MLDS is designed to differentiate for a variety of needs and is also aware of the fact that principals will be at a variety of skill levels within each of these areas. In order to focus upon principal growth, DESE has included a continuum that fosters leadership competencies in a progressive sequence. There are four levels (aspiring, emerging, developing, and transformational) and each level represents leadership growth across the career of a principal beginning with pre-service preparation, aspiring (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019).

**Image 2: MLDS Intentional Capacity Building (Appendix B.2)**

## MLDS – Intentional Capacity Building

13

Progressive system of support and training for school principals



The MLDS program is set up through professional development centers that are established in different regions of the state. The program functions through a variety of workshops and mentoring experiences that are built around creating Learning Experiences for developing principals. Each Learning Experiences is divided up into specific “Treatments” that get principals into activities that are meant to simulate real world experiences. Each level of development has specific and tailored experiences

which are designed to meet the differentiated needs of that level (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019).

As each of these “treatments” happen, and principals undergo professional development, MLDS has also provided a way to measure or to visualize growth throughout the competencies. To do this, they have created progressions for the competencies which allow for varying levels of ability based on a principal’s experience. See below for an example of the type of measurement that is used (Rutherford, Gregory, Katnik, & Shellinger, 2016):

### Image 3: Learning Progression Example (Appendix B.3)

The **Principal** as the **Instructional Leader** ensures a guaranteed and viable curriculum.

<b>Leadership Competency #4</b> —Engages and supports staff to vertically and horizontally align curriculum to state/district standards (PSEL 4a,b;6d; 9i;10a,e)			
<b>Aspiring Leader</b>	<b>Emerging Leader</b>	<b>Developing Leader</b>	<b>Transformational Leader</b>
Understands standards as they apply to horizontal and vertical alignment of local curricula and content areas.	Examines and becomes familiar with the existing curriculum and learning standards.	Facilitates staff discussions to ensure curriculum is comprehensive, rigorous, aligned, and engaging and supports continuity and fidelity across all grades and content areas.	Ensures staff regularly collaborates to continuously monitor and adjust the vertical and horizontal alignment of the curriculum to improve student learning.
The <b>Distinguished Transformational Leader</b> coaches, trains and/or mentors others in how to ensure a guaranteed and viable curriculum.			

Most importantly for the work of supporting and developing new principals, MLDS has identified specific programming for the Emerging Level (Rutherford, Gregory, Katnik, & Shellinger, 2016), which consists mainly of principals in their first and second year on the job. They focus on developing an awareness of the large and persistent effects of first impressions, identify key windows of opportunity for building

positive momentum, and learn practical and timely strategies for creating successful and future shaping initial school experiences” (p. 3).

A major aspect of the work done by MLDS has also included a full list of competencies for principals at the emerging level (Appendix B.4). The work that is then done as part of the treatment is focused on each of these competencies and structured to provide different levels of support based on the unique needs of new principals (Rutherford, Gregory, Katnik, & Shellinger, 2016)

According to some of the early findings, MLDS has been effective for the principals who are able to participate during their first or second year. In strong contrast to the high turnover rates of principals in general, data from the spring of 2019 shows that 98.5% principals who participated in the MLDS program at the Emerging level have returned for their second or third year. This shows that with purposeful and meaningful support, it is possible to help new principals get off to a great start and to lessen the impact of early principal turnover.

### **Differentiated Supports**

While Missouri’s plan is successful for those who are able and choose to participate, there is still an additional need for a variety of methods that can help meet the needs of new principals and in order to help them to be successful. When considering the factors that led to principal’s leaving their school or district, it is important to remember that overwhelming managerial responsibilities and long hours were two of the main reasons that were mentioned (Celoria & Roberson, 2015; Levin, Scott, Yang, Leung, & Bradley, 2020; School Leaders Network, 2014). These factors are important when considering any model, including Missouri’s model, because, unlike teachers, principals



do not get a substitute principal when they are out of the building. Missouri's model requires principals to leave their building for the professional development (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Speaking from first hand experience, being gone for the day doesn't diminish the amount of managerial or job related concerns for a principal, it can actually add to them. The emails will still come, and the sender will expect to be answered, phone calls and messages will be there when you return, and any issues that may have popped up will remain unresolved until he or she is able to address it. In order to address these issues, it can mean going to office or working from home after the professional development session and/or having them added to the to-do list for the next day. Then, there is the fact that new principals may be worried about getting a reputation for being gone all the time, and they will be careful to not have their supervisors, staffs, and school community think that there is no one leading the ship (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). All of these factors, and some which aren't mentioned, may likely keep a significant number of principals from participating in a program such as MLDS. However, that doesn't mean that they still don't have a need for something that can help address their desire for support.

It certain ways, these findings leave leadership development systems stuck between a rock and a hard place. This conundrum also shows up in Eller's (2010) review of a new principal development program, which was similar to Missouri's, in Virginia. As part of this work Eller (2010) interviewed the participants of the program. While they stated that they had positive feelings about the program, their main suggestions dealt with better use of time in order to reduce time out of the building, and with finding different ways for them to connect informally or in a way that wouldn't impact their day-to-day

work in the building. They suggested finding ways to use technology, informal networking, or other ways that would allow for them to connect on their own time (Eller, 2010).

If a principal doesn't want to be gone from their office too much, it is reasonable to assume that they may turn to articles, journals, and books for ideas and strategies for their first year. When looking for articles and books specifically written to support a new principal, many of them are told in the same format. Much of what exists may be a short, numbered list (Borelli, 2007), a list of "rules" (Curtis, 2004), or what feels like a to-do list without a lot to connect it to (Rooney, 2013). Or, one may find a book full of scenarios (Schwanke, 2016) that can provide good thinking activities, but can be hard to connect to and hard to apply. At the end of the day, reading these types of material may do little more than leave a new principal with a longer to-do list and some additional stress about getting everything accomplished.

There's a need for materials which can build upon the aspects of a plan such as Missouri's MLDS which have proven successful in helping to support new principals: mentoring, real world connections to actual problems framed through a lens which addresses all of the unique aspects of the job, and a focus on hearing from others about what to prioritize, what worked, and what didn't. There is a need for papers, articles, and books that show how real people have done this before. These types of writing can make it feel possible for another person to succeed as well.

We know principals feel isolated, stressed, and can be overwhelmed by a lack of time and the demands of the job (Spillane & Lee, 2014; Bauer & Brazer, 2013; Crow, 2006; Snodgrass Rangel, 2018; School Leaders Network, 2014; Levin, Scott, Yang,

Leung, & Bradley, 2020). We also know that hearing from others experiences, connecting with people who have been there before, and working with mentors and coaches have both proven to be successful and are the pieces that new principals have reported wanting more time to experience (Celoria & Roberson, 2015; Eller, 2010). I believe there is one unique avenue that has proven effective for helping adults to learn, to connect through shared experiences, and that can done on their own time; storytelling and the purposeful sharing of common experiences (Caminotti & Gray, 2012).

There is a need for new principals to hear the stories of others. Stories have a unique power to illicit connection, and telling stories can be a way for one person to make sense of their own experience and to then communicate that experience to others and do so in a way that helps to teach people how to use their own unique strengths and who they are to become all that they are wanting to be (Lawrence & Paige, 2016). According to Lawrence and Paige (2016), “Storytelling is a natural and organic aspect of adult education as it taps into the experience of the learners. The eliciting of personal stories makes the curriculum content more real, more immediate and more personal” (p. 66). Using the stories of experienced principals to help guide a new principal is a unique way of addressing the specific needs and situation of a new principal.

#### **IV. How It’s Been Done – The 3 S’s of New Principal Success**

This isn’t another checklist, or disconnected book about theories of leadership. These are the experiences of people still working every day as principals and what they did to survive and thrive in their first year. I write this not as an ivory tower academic, but as a principal. I have done some things right, and many things wrong, but most important I just hope I can help a little bit. This article is combination of the learning that

I and other principals have been able to experience. These experiences are designed to provide a context that will allow for an easy connection and through a format that can be easily remembered.

While the MDLS Framework and Emerging Principal Competencies are very comprehensive and all encompassing, they can also be overwhelming when you are trying to think about where to start and what to keep in mind as a new principal. Because of this, I have found what I think is a user-friendlier framework, **The “3 S’s”**:

**Stakeholders, Systems and Self.** This structure will not only make sure that all of the bases are covered regarding the “What” of being a principal, but also provides a useful mnemonic device to help you think through each aspect of the role. Each “S” represents a different aspect of the job, and while they are separate, there is a tremendous amount of interplay between them that you will discover as you go about your work. Each of these is crucial to the operation of the building and to the job as principal, and each is something that has to be planned for and thought through as you transition into your new role.

As you read this work, you will occasionally notice a code that will follow a sentence or a paragraph. That code will be a reference to these Emerging Level Competencies (Appendix B.4). The code will contain a letter, the first letter of the domain, and a number which corresponds to the competency number. For example, if we are discussing systems for creating relationships with staff you may see **(R21)**. This would refer to the Relational Leader domain and competency number 21. This coding allows for immediate connection back to all aspects of the job and can be used as a quick reference to research based ideas and practices, all while using the 3 S Framework which

is more easily remembered. One can be assured that by focusing on the 3 S's they aren't missing a thing.

## **V. The First S - Stakeholders**

During my first year as a principal, I was walking down the hallway, and I came across a student who was exiting the bathroom. I casually said, "Hello", and he returned the greeting. A few seconds later, I heard him calling my name. I turned around to help him, and he said he had a question for me. He looked at me, and said, "Mr. Fisher, if all you do is walk around the hallways, why do you have to come school everyday?" Now, obviously this isn't true. As any principal knows, there is much more to the job than just walking the halls, not that that wouldn't be nice some days, but I use this story to highlight the fact that most people, including parents, staff, and students, have no idea what it is that the principal actually does all day.

Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to work in multiple roles (teacher, counselor, administrative intern, assistant principal, and principal) and with each new role, I have found that one thing is true: I really didn't know all that the job actually entailed. While working as a teacher, and prior to becoming a counselor, I remember thinking, "I work with the counselor. I know what they do." Then, I became the counselor and realized, "Oh wow, I had no idea they did all of this!!" The same things happened when I moved from counselor to administrative intern, from intern to assistant principal, and probably no more so, than when I moved from assistant principal to principal. The truth is, there is only one person who knows what the principal does all day, and that's the principal.

Knowing the job is also only half the battle, as you move between roles, you will find that your own professional identity will change. You may have always seen yourself as a teacher, a counselor, or any other role, but now as you make this transition, you are becoming the principal. The job can be lonely as most schools only have one principal. There may be assistant principals, but there is only one principal, and for everyone else in the building, you are their boss. As one experienced principal, Principal C, says, “When I first became the principal, one of the first things that surprised me was the sense of being alone. As a teacher, there were always other teachers in the building, but now, I was the only principal, and it was lonely. I spent the first few weeks feeling like I was playing the role of principal, and not being the principal. It took me a while to get settled in. A few years later, I moved to a new school and was a new principal all over again. This time, I knew I needed to bring myself to my work. I had learned that to take on this job, I needed to find a comfort level with who I am as a leader and be able to bring that into the office with me.” In this job, no two days are ever going to be alike, and it’s important to remember that you were chosen for a reason, you are the principal, it’s your school and it’s filled with your staff and your students, be you, and then remember it’s never lonely when you think of it as a community.

For a new principal, there is nothing more important than the 3 R’s, and no, I don’t mean reading, writing, and ‘rithmetic. For a new principal, the 3 R’s are even simpler. They are Relationships, Relationships, and Relationships. If the physical building has issues, that’s due to something that happened before you arrived, and while you can start fixing it, you will also be granted some leeway to get it all repaired. If everything isn’t perfect, that can be ok because there will be some things you may need

to live with and understand before trying to make major changes. You have some time on these things, but the old adage is true, you only have one chance to make a first impression, and you can't wait to make sure this impression is positive. Education is ultimately a people business, and if the people that you work with feel safe and trust you, then the sky is the limit.

Every principal, including myself, that I spoke with had a couple of things in common. We all said that the best things we did during our first year were the things that focused on relationships and relationship building. We all also said that if we were to change anything that we did our first year it would be that we would spend more time on building relationships. You simply cannot over-invest when it comes to relationship building, and it has to be THE priority for the beginning of your first year.

Within the school setting, there are generally three groups that you want to have a plan and a strategy for when it comes to building relationships. Those three groups are staff, families and community, and students.

### **Staff**

I don't care how old you are, there is something about having to "go to the principal's office" that is intimidating. But, if you are going to create a strong working environment and a powerful culture in your building, you must find a way to transform your office from the *Principal's Office* into YOUR Office. It can't be about going to see the role, it has to be about going to see you, and the feeling that comes with that is something that you can control and can build if you do it the right way (R21).

In his book *Culture Code*, Coyle (2018) makes the case that creating a culture in which groups can thrive and become successful starts by making them feel safe. They should feel safe to take risks, safe to be themselves, and safe to make mistakes. When people feel safe, they can focus and produce. The first step of building an authentic relationship with your staff is to find a way to create this safety. Coyle gives examples of how small gestures and authentic listening can help to create this feeling, and if you do nothing else in your first few months as principal, find a way to make small comforting gestures and find time to authentically listen.

When I first became a principal, I knew that relationships were important, and I had the idea of meeting with each individual staff member as soon as was possible. What I didn't realize when I first did this, was just how meaningful and powerful these conversations would be for me and for our school. These meetings helped to break the ice and just the fact that each staff member knew I was dedicating time to listen to them, to pick their brain, and for us to get to know one another sent a very powerful message. It also allowed me to hear about the history of the building and to look for trends in the feelings and thoughts of the staff members. These conversations not only helped to create a safe feeling, but they actually helped lay the focus and groundwork for the next five years of work that we did together (**V1, V2, M10, R21, R22, R23, R25, INV31, INV32**).

The idea of meeting with each staff member can seem pretty easy, but it is also important to remember that not only are you beginning the process of making a relationship, but you are looking for information that can help move the building forward. In his book *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organization and*



*Inspires Innovation*, Tim Brown (2009) explains the process of putting people first in order to solve problems and to move organizations forward. He talks about how insights, observations, and empathy can help lay the foundation for work to come and to help solve problems. We have to find a way to get insight into the problem, make observations on how it is playing out, and then to empathize with those who are impacted. These conversations are essentially research into the school through the lens of the people who have worked there. This information is invaluable and there is no better investment of time than sitting and listening to the people who you will serve.

Meeting individually with staff is not the only way to start to build these relationships. Another option, or even in addition to personal meetings, are informal get-togethers for the whole staff. Principal B, C, and D all did these and mentioned them as a great ice breaker and way to help everyone enter into the relationship in an easy and casual manner. Principal C had three or four social events, including a get-to-know her event. She said that it was these events that let people begin to see her as a person and not just a role or her boss. After each event she would reflect and write down things that were said or mentioned that she could then use to help her move the building forward.

Whether you choose to do one-on-one meetings, large gatherings, or something in-between, be ready to make a major investment into building relationships with your staff. Your time is valuable, but this is one place that ensures your greatest return on investment, and is one practice that can be repeated in the future for continued benefits and community building.

### **Families and Community**

In the ever-changing world of education, it is also important to remember that a principal cannot just think of themselves as the leader of a staff. They have to remember that they are also the leader of a community. With this idea in mind, Khalifa (2012) points out that a principal is in a unique role and when they are visible and participate as a leader in the community, trust increases, parent involvement increases, and ultimately students are more successful because the school itself is more supported. This community leadership leads to what I like to think of as the “shaking hands and kissing babies” part of the job. I don’t mean this as way to down play this impact, but as a way for me to enjoy it and to remember that it is an essential part of the job. Relationships aren’t just about the staff, but also about the families and the communities. What are the structures in place to engage parents? Is there an active parent-teacher organization (PTO) that supports the school? Has the school participated in a home visit program? Who are the parents that can help you make connections and in-roads into the community? Find them, and meet with them. Make sure you can be seen as someone that will listen and is ready to be a part of a vibrant school community. You are asking people to send you their most precious resource, their children, and you want them to feel comfortable knowing that you will take care of them.

The final piece of this “shaking hands and kissing babies” role is to think about how you will be introduced to the school community as a whole. I think it is vital to hold an event for families to come and meet you. It could be Popsicles on the Playground, a summer picnic, a game day at the school, it doesn’t matter what the event is, just that there is one. The event also needs to be family oriented, and it needs to provide a chance

for families to see you interact with the children. The importance of safety is not just for staff, but is also important for both parents and kids.

It doesn't matter whether your school is located in a big city or a small town. Principal A was a principal in a large city and a large district and talked about the importance of walking the community, meeting the families, seeing the kids, and creating opportunities for them to see him and for him to meet and talk to them. Principal B was a new principal in a small-town and a small district, and she made sure I understood just how important the school was for the community and for the families. She held multiple events and found multiple ways to connect, and said that every one of them was well worth it (**R18, R24, R25**).

## **Students**

Ok, by now you've put plans in place to meet and interact staff. You've got ideas and events ready for meeting families and community members, honestly, these are really about giving them a chance to meet you and for you to create a good first impression. Now, it's time to talk about the group of people who are really at the center of all that we do: the students.

First, give yourself a break here, there will be hundreds of them, so this won't happen overnight. There will be too many of them to try to meet one-on-one with all of the students. Also, remember that you have to be authentic and real with them. No one will be able to tell if you are faking or trying to be something you aren't as quickly as kids can. Be intentional, and take your time.

The first place to start when building relationships with students is with a few proactive first few steps. “One of the first things I did was to get a copy of the yearbook from the previous year and studied the student pictures. I read it each night for several weeks, and then when we had our family events, I was able to put many names with faces and win some immediate friends,” said Principal B. Getting a yearbook and beginning to see their faces is a great place to start. Doing this before hosting the family events is also a great idea, and is a great way to start making connections, meeting kids, and most importantly you can start learning kids names, and every kid loves when their principal knows their name.

Another proactive step is to block out your schedule for at least the first week of school during lunch and recess times. Seeing kids in the classroom is great and has to be done, but seeing them at lunch at recess will truly allow you to get to know them personally and to see what they like to do and who they like to hang out with. Recess and lunch are the times when students aren’t at work, but get to play and can show other sides of their personality. Working these recesses and lunches not only help you make relationships, but can also a good opportunity for you to be sure that all students know your expectations for how things should run on the playground and in the cafeteria.

The next level for building relationships with students is to think about a few large group opportunities. The first opportunity for this will be an opening assembly with the whole school. Work with your teachers and pick a time during the first day to two and schedule a time for a beginning of the year assembly. This is your chance to introduce yourself to all the students. The other large group strategy that I have found very helpful is leading classroom expectation talks. At some point in the first few weeks,

I schedule a 30 minute time for me to take each classroom and to teach expectations in the areas that the whole school shares: hallways, bathrooms, cafeteria, playground, and the bus. I schedule a time, then come to the classroom and then physically take the students to each of those areas and discuss our school-wide expectations. Doing this allows for me to see the students in more a learning, classroom setting, and it also lets them have another chance to meet and hear from me. The other bonus is that it can give the teacher an extra half hour to catch his or her breath as you take the kids, and this can only help earn you a few bonus points in their books as well.

Finally, create both small group and individual opportunities to build relationships. This includes things in unstructured settings, like saying hi in the hallway, to more structured and planned events, such as office visits. The key to the unstructured times is just to be aware and ready to greet students any time you have the chance. Be quick with a smile, and if you know their name, be sure to use it. When it comes to office visits, people often think only of the times when these happen because students have done something wrong, but looking for other opportunities for office visits is a great way to make relationships.

One strategy for building relationships through office visits is positive office referrals. For several years, I have created a positive office referral form that teacher can use when the “catch” a student doing something good. The form gets turned into the office, I then call the student down, and we celebrate together. The final piece of this is that I will call home with the student so that we can celebrate together. The goal here is two-fold. First, it creates a positive foundation for a relationship with a student and family, and second, it also starts to chip away at the negative reputation that haunts the

principal's office. If students only come there when they are in trouble, students will only see you for one purpose and will not want anything to do with you, or ever feel like you are there to help. When this ice is broken, they see you differently which allows your work to be more impactful and meaningful with the students.

Another strategy that Principal D shared was setting up principal lunches. "At the beginning of the year, I work with my assistant to schedule times for each student to join me for a pizza lunch that I provide. I do this in small groups, and at first, I might have a couple of discussion questions planned, but inevitably, we end up sitting and laughing and talking about all kinds of stuff. It is a great way for both of us to see another side of each other," he told me.

I am sure you didn't get into education just to be the "big, scary person in the big, scary office", you entered the profession to make a difference in the lives of kids. Being purposeful and having a plan for making relationships with kids will go a lot way towards making sure you continue to meet this goal even now that you have entered the Principal's Office (**R18, R19, R20**).

I know. I can feel it; actually, I can almost even hear it. Your to-do list is growing, but remember, even though it will take a long time, there is nothing, and I mean nothing, more important than taking the time to build these relationships. In the next few weeks, months, and years, there will be ups and there will be downs, but at the end of the day it will be the strength of these relationships that will carry you through, and building this foundation is something that can't wait.

## **VI. The Second S - Systems**

When I speak of systems, I am essentially talking about all of the things that are in place to make sure that a school can run effectively and to create an environment that feels safe, welcoming, and comfortable for any and everyone who may enter. Mainly, I think of systems as both the physical environment (the school building itself) and the management pieces that are necessary to ensure that hundreds of students are able to learn each day.

### **Physical environment**

For me, I think of the physical environment as anything that you can feel and touch in the school. This includes the entire building and the school grounds. This includes common areas such as a lobby, gymnasium, hallways, bathrooms, classrooms, storage spaces, resources, parking lots, facilities pieces such as the HVAC and plumbing systems, and all of the outdoor spaces (playgrounds, fields, gardens, etc.) as well.

While there can be a tendency to overlook this aspect unless there is a glaring safety need or major issue such as a wall collapsing, flooding, etc., I believe that a focus on the physical environment is an essential component to our job as the principal. In support of this idea, Maxwell (2016) found that the physical environment of a school has a significant impact on students' feelings of wellbeing and ultimately on their levels of achievement. I believe that there are three essential components that must be considered when thinking about the physical environment of your school: safety, function, and feel (M10).

Safety and function are fairly obvious, but can't be overlooked. One of the first things that a new principal should do is walk their entire building. If you can, you should

have the custodian or a district facilities person join you on this walk. During the walk, pay particularly close attention for any major safety issues. Is there anything that is broken that needs to be fixed right away? Are there electrical or plumbing issues that need to be addressed? If it's summer, and there's a good chance it is, are there any construction projects that are being done and if so, will they be done in time for the school year to start? Make a list and look for anything that needs to be repaired or replaced. Also, don't forget to check everything outside of the building. Don't forget to check the parking lot. Is it well marked? Is it well lit? These things can seem small, but with evening events and other factors this can be very important. Is the playground in need of repair? Are there bees or other safety hazards that need to be taken care of? The other benefit of this walk is that it will allow you to find out the process for maintenance issues. Is there a department that handles this, and if so, how do you submit work orders and make sure the work is done. This process won't take very long, and it is definitely time well spent (**M10, M11**).

Beyond just safety, as you walk the building, think about function. Where do busses and cars drop-off and pick-up students? Does it make sense, and is it safe and effective? Is there logical thought process as to how classrooms are placed and to where teachers are located? Are grade levels together? Should they be? Can students transition from common areas (bathrooms, cafeteria, specialist classes, playground, etc.) easily and safely? Go through a day from start to finish and picture in your mind how things will flow. From students arrival, through transitions, to recess, lunch, and dismissal, think through the plans for each of these times and make sure the building is ready (**M11**).



The final aspect of the functioning of the school building is storage and resource management. With regards to storage, it seems that no matter how much there is, there is never enough. What are the storage areas? How are they used? If you run out of the space, is there a district process for handling overflow, such as a district warehouse where stuff can be stored. It is amazing how much “stuff” can be accumulated in a school building, and it is important to remember that there is never too much storage space **(M10)**.

While there will be things that always need to be stored, there will also be things that must be ordered and managed as well. Does every classroom have the needed amount of furniture? Are there unique spaces, such as a Makerspace, that requires an ongoing inventory? How is technology allocated, managed, and repaired? Is there a supply of recess equipment and a process for making sure it is ready to go? All of these things can slip through the cracks at the beginning of the year if we aren’t careful, but taking a few minutes to ensure that each of these boxes are checked can take one thing off of your plate and will help to make sure that you aren’t surprised by an issue later in the year **(M11, M16, M17)**.

Thinking about the physical environment is also a great way for you to learn about the roles and some of the people you may be working with in your new building. “Yes, I walked the building alone once, but I also walked it with my custodian and assistant principal. They were able to tell me more about the function of certain aspects and knew about some of the hidden gems that would have been unseen to me. Plus, it gave me the chance to get to know them in a laid back and easy way that was done more on their turf.” At the end of the day, while the principal is technically in charge of

everything, you can't do it alone, and it will be important to utilize the strengths and knowledge of everyone in the building (**R22, R25, M12**).

Whether we realize it or not, one of the most important aspects of the physical environment is the message it sends and feeling that it helps to create for anyone who walks through the doors (**V1 and V3**). In much of their work, DuFour and Eaker (2008) point out how essential it is that every school has a mission. They must be able to answer the question, "Why do we exist?" and once that message is known, it is essential that it is communicated to anyone who may enter your school. After making a strong case for the importance of mission statements and for communicating an organizations mission, Fugazzotto (2009) notes "Because it stands out physically in daily institutional life, campus space makes mission, and thus structure and culture, even more tangible. Space behaves like statements of purpose to help define relations between an organization and its constituents." Our building itself delivers a message, and it is essential that we look at the physical environment and determine what message it communicates to anyone who enters. If the message needs updating, then this is without a doubt one thing that goes on to the to-do list, "identify our mission and vision and make sure it is clear to anyone who enters" (**V2**).

Each of these aspects of the physical environment can be easy to overlook. As educators, we can get caught up in the process, but we must also remember that without taking care of our building and our resources, we would be asking our educators to do an impossible task. We wouldn't ask a carpenter to build a house without the right tools, and we shouldn't expect teachers to educate students without taking care of their resources as well. The tools, the space, and the supports that you are able to provide for

your teachers and staff are extremely important. When most people think of resources, their minds may immediately go to finances, but it is important we remember the desks, the computers, the spaces and all of the physical environment pieces that can make or break any of our work with our students (M17).

No school is an island, and the final piece of the physical environment is actually the community within which your school sits. Upon getting hired in his school, Principal A took the time to not only walk around his school, but to also walk and drive through the community where his students lived and spent each day. He realized that his playground and basketball hoops were one of the few park like areas in the neighborhood, so he worked to ensure that it would be well maintained and available to students during the weekends and the evenings. He saw this as a great way for people to see the school as more than just the place where students come from 8:00-3:00 on the weekdays, but also to see it as a valuable part of the community (M17, R19, R24).

### **Process Management**

One of the beautiful things about public education is the fact that there is a process in place for almost everything. A new student moves into the district, there's a process for that. A teacher needs to take maternity leave, there's a process for that. Feeding hundreds of kids in only a few hours, there's a process for that. Everything has a process and a structure. From the time the students arrive, be it by bus, car, bike, or walking, until the time they head back home, their days are covered in structure and routine. All of these systems ensure efficiency, and because of this, it is essential that you learn and review each of the plans that are currently in place. Generally, there are

two levels of processes, building and district, and then there are the ways in which these factors both intersect to impact the day-to-day operations of a building.

With regards to the building level structures there is usually one key thing that can help answer and unlock all of your questions: the handbook. Most schools have at least one handbook, and many have two: one for staff, and one for parents and students. In this handbook there should be an explanation of everything. Whether it is how to drop your child off at school, put money into their lunch account, report an absence, or how soon staff members should respond to email and what day is Casual Day (side note, if you don't have one of these, could be a great idea and win you instant points with your staff), everything should be covered in this handbook. Very soon after you have been hired, find this book, read this book, change and update anything you need to, but make sure you know this book (**M11 and M13**).

There's only one problem with this strategy, what happens if there is no handbook? First, don't panic, take a deep breath and be glad we live in the Internet era. Upon getting my first job as a principal and joining my new school, one of the first things I quickly discovered was that there was no handbook. I was fortunate enough to be in a large district with multiple schools at each level, and I was able to email a few of my colleagues and they each shared their handbook so that I could use theirs as a guide. I also went to Google and typed in "elementary school handbook" and found more examples than any person could possibly want. Each of these served as a starting point, they allowed me to construct a fairly comprehensive view of the school, and with the help of my office staff, I was able to construct a solid handbook that has helped anyone new to transition into our building.

### **District level systems**

Beyond just the building and district level handbooks there is also another set of guidelines that some districts may have, the collective bargaining agreement that is made with the teacher's union. If your district has one of these, I would strongly recommend reading it. Knowing the agreement can help keep you from making a wrong step right out of the gate as you begin making decisions for your building. For example, one of the things you will need to start thinking about is how you may structure things like staff meetings, grade level team meetings, student data-team meetings, and teacher professional development. Some districts may have guidelines and restriction for much of what you may want to build into your plans for the year, and you don't want to start your tenure in office with a grievance issue and a meeting with your building's union rep. Reading this is a proactive strategy to make sure you start off on the right foot (**M11, INV32**).

For many of us who have worked in large districts there is another factor that we must consider. The fact that even as a building leader, you are really just one piece in a larger system, and as such there will also be district level processes that will guide a lot of your work. After learning the ins and outs of your own building, it will be important to meet with a variety of people in the district who can help explain these district level guidelines. Each district will have their own organizational flow, but among others you will want to meet with the people who handle at least the following: human resource issues (evaluation, benefits, payroll, hiring, etc.), curriculum and instruction (also may include technology, assessment, and professional development), and finance (budgeting and ordering processes). If your district has someone over facilities and maintenance,

they can also be a good addition. In a smaller district, this could be one person, but in a large district, this may mean multiple people. Find a chart of the organization and find a time to meet with each of these people. The last person, but probably most important, to meet with as soon as possible is your direct supervisor. They can help set up the other meetings, answer questions, and hopefully even assign you a peer mentor to help with the transition. Each district will have its own way of doing things, but it is important to realize that you are now a district administrator, and as such, will have to make sure to follow the district level policies.

When meeting with each of the district level administrators, you will want to focus on making sure you have an understanding about each of the practices and procedures that are handled by their department. When talking with the finance department, you want to understand the budget process and find out who in your building has the most experience with maintaining the budget and making orders. When talking with curriculum and instruction, you will want to know where to find the district level curriculum, what district level assessments are given, and the general format and structure for professional development. Human resources (HR) can help you learn the hiring process and the steps they require. HR is also generally where you will find out the rules and expectations for teacher evaluation. What is the tool you will use, how often do you evaluate, and what types of evaluations do you need to do? Some of this information you will need to know immediately, and other material you may not need for several months, but all of it is important and will be needed **(V3, I4, I5, I6, I7, I8, I9, M12, M14, M15, M16)**

There is one other thing that will drive much of what you do and that will take up a lion's share of what your efforts are focused on, and that is your building's School Improvement Plan (SIP). Each district may have a slightly different model and a different focus, but this plan will be used to drive many of your building goals and discussions for the year. Principal D shaped this idea perfectly when comparing the two districts he has worked, "In my first building, we were fighting for accreditation, and because of this, everything was about the specific standards and measurements from the state test. Our goals, our conversations, our interventions, our professional development, everything was about the test scores. This was something that was tight across the whole district. Then, when I moved districts, I moved to a building in a district where the focus was more site based, and many of these things were determined on a building level based on what we saw the students needed. We had a format for how our school improvement plan had to be done, but we had more freedom in picking the criteria." In either case, this plan will drive a lot of what happens in your building, and when you meet with your supervisor, you need to make sure this topic is on the agenda (**V1, V2, I9, M15, INV29, INV31, INV32**).

### **Day to day operations**

In talking about what she was able to do differently when she moved to a new school and was a "new" principal again, Principal B shared, "In my second stint as a new principal, one of the things that I was able to do that I wish I had done at my first school, was to focus more on our building level committees, teams, and decision making processes. I was really able to do more with shared leadership, and this helped to make sure it wasn't 'my building', but felt more like it was 'our building'. I needed to

understand that it's ok for me to not make all the decisions and have all the answers."

Regardless of whether it's building a master schedule, creating or meeting the goals in your SIP, determining budgetary needs, determining student interventions and learning goals, or many other things, having plans for sharing the decision making is essential and will pay off in the end.

***Building-wide committees and grade level teams.***

In my first year as the new principal in my second school, the first meeting I was a part of was to construct a shared master schedule that would be used at all the elementary schools in the district. It's a small district, so this would only impact three schools. As I walked in, the first thing I noticed was that the only people in the room were administrators. This struck me as odd, but I was new to the district and thought, it must be how they did things. We proceeded to go ahead and build a schedule for each grade level that would be used at each building, decided when we would share the schedule with our staff members, patted ourselves on the backs, and left.

Now, I am sure you may be able to guess how well that went. The first call I received was from one of our kindergarten teachers. She said, "I am really sorry to call you with this, but you know that schedule won't work right?" It took her five minutes to look at the schedule and see an issue which would impact her, the students, and several other teachers. We had placed our kindergarteners specials (art, music, PE, etc) right before their recess. I didn't understand why this was an issue. She then very politely pointed out the fact that in the winter, kindergarten students can't put on their own coats, and given that another class would be coming into the specialists' classrooms, they would



be unable to help all of the students get ready to go outside. Luckily, our kindergarten team is amazing, as most are, and they were able to find a way to make this work, but it also reminded me of how important shared leadership can be.

In any building there are three types of decisions that must be made: me, we, and you decisions. Most decisions are “you” decisions. In this case, “you” refers to anyone who is not the principal. Each person in the building has a role to play, and each role has certain requirement. These roles will all include minute-by-minute decisions that each staff member makes as they fulfill their jobs. For example, teachers make hundreds of decisions each day, and they don’t require my input in almost any of them.

“We” decisions are the decisions that require shared leadership and a collective strategy and process. As a new principal, it is important that you spend some time thinking about what this process may look like and how you will structure it. Here’s the structure that I have found which works for me. I currently have four committees. Each certified staff member is required to be on a committee, but they can choose whichever committee speaks to them. The committee choices have changed based on the goals and the focus of our building, but there is one committee that I see as essential to the functioning of the building and that I would highly recommend be included in any plans for a new principal. This is the Leadership Committee. This is the only committee upon which I require to have one person from each team (grade level, specialists, special education, etc.). This committee helps to make management decisions. For example, after only one year, we had to re-do the schedule that the administrators had made. We used a different process, and allowed for each building to create their own schedule as long as it met certain requirements. Our Leadership Committee built ours and given that

each group had a voice in the creation, we were able to build something that worked much better for all. This committee also reviews budget needs, building procedural issues, and other whole building needs that come up (**V1, V2, V3, M10, M11, M12, M13, M16, M17, R18, R19, R21, R22, R23**)

I also currently utilize a committee to help plan and deliver professional development, another to focus our work on the whole child and the social/emotional needs of our students, and one we call the Caring Committee that focuses on staff members taking care of each other and finding ways for the adults in the building to know that they are cared about as well. I am sure you have seen a variety of structures and committees that have been utilized to help with shared decision making, and as you look towards shaping what you and your building need, how you make the “we” decisions will prove very important.

The final piece of the “we” decision making puzzle, are grade level teams. Over the last few years, many schools have worked hard to break down the idea of teachers operating in silos, and many buildings have schedules which allow for whole grade levels to have a common time where they can collaborate and work together. Many schools have begun to call these professional learning communities (PLC’s). PLC’s are based largely on the work of Richard DuFour (2008), and by now have become almost ubiquitous in schools. The main idea of the PLC model is for teams of teachers to collaborate and decide what students need to know, how they are going to assess whether they know it or not, what they will do to intervene for kids that are not learning it, and what to do with kids who already know it.

When thinking about integrating this process into your new building, it can be important to know what has taken place prior to your coming onboard. Principal C shared this story about working with grade level teams when she started, “I followed a principal who was a micro-manager. She ruled each team with a bit of an iron-fist and many of the teams hadn’t had the chance to make many decisions as they were all made for them. This wasn’t my personality, and I wanted to have teams that collaborated and made decisions for the kids that they knew best. I wanted to build teams that worked with me to determine interventions, decide how to shape lessons, and which direction we wanted to go next. No one person has all the knowledge, including me, and it’s important that we work together to make these decisions. To build these teams, I had to build time into my schedule and into their schedules for this collaboration. I had to be ready to listen more and speak less, and to ask a lot of questions. They were the experts on their curriculum and their kids, and sometimes, we just need to be a passenger and not try to always drive the car.”

If your school isn’t using a PLC or collaboration process currently, thinking through a plan for how you and your teachers will answer these questions is essential and at the end of the day, it is the central piece of all that we do, for it is these questions that can be used to ensure that students are learning and growing which is why we are all doing what we do (**V3, I4, I5, I7, I8, I9, M14, R19, R21, R22, INV26, INV31, INV32**).

You can’t make every decision, and if you try to, you will ultimately end up driving both yourself and others crazy. Principal A described it this way, “You have to be able to give away the low hanging fruit. Be confident, and trust those around you to

be able to do their job. Be ready, at times, to not get your way and see what happens. You can't lead with trust if you don't let anyone else make any decisions."

***"Me" decisions.***

I purposely saved this category for last. Yes, others will make most decisions, and yes, you need to have a model for shared decision-making and shared leadership, but, at the end of the day, there will still be plenty of decisions that you have to make. There are two categories for these types of "me" decisions: role specific and final call.

Role specific "me" decisions are the types of decisions that can only be made by you. These are the decisions that you make because you are technically the person in charge. These include decisions such as evaluating staff, approving budgets, and making any changes to staff roles or grade level placements. These are decisions that have to be made from the top, and you can only do them. For example, a major part of your job is to evaluate and develop staff. When it comes to developing, you may be fortunate enough to have a coach or another person who can help make sure your staff grows, but you will be responsible to evaluate. A coach can't and shouldn't be a part of the evaluation, and staff evaluations are a part of the job that comes with being the principal.

Most of the "me" decisions tend to fall into what I call the *final call* category. Final call decisions are the ones that you will make because someone has to make the final call, and it's you. These are decisions where you know that no matter what, someone isn't going to like the decision, but a decision has to be made. Again, scheduling is a good example of this type of decision. Imagine you are making a master schedule. You pull together a representative group and begin the process. At some point,

there will inevitably be a conflict of interest. Could be that one grade level wants to teach reading in the morning, but PE needs to have them at that time in the morning because they need to set up equipment and can't lose instructional time to do so. If you choose the grade level, PE is upset. If you choose PE, the grade level is upset. There is no easy answer.

When I spoke with the other principals, these types of decisions came up. In our discussion, Principal B made this point, "When you have to make one of these decisions, I have learned, that it's important to remember that not everyone has to agree with you, but you want them to respect you and respect your decision because they know it was made with the best interests in mind." What she means is that you have to be able to communicate what you think and why. You have to turn inward, look at the situation, think about what you believe is best for your kids and your school as a whole, and then be able to explain why you think this. Essentially, you have to be able to defend your decision.

The final piece of this is that you also have to be transparent in how this decision was made. Your staff needs to know that it was your decision. You can't give the impression that you are being guided by the last person who came into your office. You need to be able to say, "Here's what I think and why." That doesn't mean that you won't change your mind or make mistakes, and if you do, you can explain what was wrong and what you have learned. You can explain what facts caused you to change your decision, you can share that process as well, but it is important that everyone knows it was your decision.

“Me” decisions do not make up the bulk of the decisions that are made each day, and no one will expect you to be perfect, but you can’t give the impression that you are afraid to make a decision. We have all seen principals who have struggled in part because they spent a lot of time trying to please everyone. It can’t be done. You cannot make all of the people happy all of the time, so don’t try. Be sure to listen, gather feedback, and empathize with those who are impacted, but at the end of the day, you have to make the decision you believe in and can defend **(R21, INV28)**

The systems that organize and run your school are essential. These are the pieces that “make sure the trains run on time,” and without them, a new principal would quickly lose control. These are tangible pieces that must be thought through and put into place. Taking some time to go through each of these pieces is an investment that no new principal will ever regret, because in many ways, it is these things which can help ensure a feeling of safety, care, and control, and this goes a long way towards building a culture that ensures high performance.

## **VII. The Third S - Self**

In my office I have two small signs. One sign says, “How are the Children”, and the other sign says, “Let Bartlet be Bartlet” (as in President Bartlet from *The West Wing*). These are my mission statements. They remind me of my “why”. They are the anchors that remind me that what I do matters. Each has a story and a meaning. “How are the Children” comes from the book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* by Dr. Joy DeGruy Leary (2005). In the book she tells the story of the Maasai tribe and how their traditional greeting of one another began with one person saying, “And how are the children?” and

then the other person replying with “All the children are well.” This sign reminds me of the fact that this is our work. We want to be able to answer with, “ALL the children are well.” It’s why we are here.

The other sign is a bit more obtuse but has come in handy multiple times. “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet” comes from an episode of the television show *The West Wing* (2000). In the episode, Martin Sheen’s character, President Bartlet, spends a lot of time trying to figure out how to make decisions that will please all constituencies, but eventually realizes that he can’t. He eventually has to follow his heart and do what he feels is best even if it doesn’t make everyone happy. This is in my office because this will happen. There will be decisions that have to be made which won’t make everyone happy, and at the end of the day, I have to remember to “Let Bartlet be Bartlet.”

Principal D put it this way, “Each day, I am guided by one question. How do I want my students, families, and staff to describe me. I have to know who I am as a leader. Do I want them to say that I was a dictator who ruled with an iron fist because I only wanted what I wanted and was afraid to listen, of course not. But, I also don’t want them to think that I was directionless and was guided by whichever was the last voice that I heard. What I want is for them to say that they always knew I cared about them, our school, and our kids. I want them to say that even if they disagreed with me, they still respected me because they knew I was a good man with the best intentions. It doesn’t mean that everyone likes everything I do, but that our relationships are built on mutual trust, respect, understanding, and care.”

The first two of my three S's added a lot to your to-do list. This last S isn't as much about doing, but more about knowing, reflecting, and remembering. I have a notes page on my phone, which is dedicated to reflections. Throughout the day, thoughts and reflections pop into my head, and I am able to jot them down in here. Even if I am in my car or out for a run, I can still tell Siri to add things to my list. This is especially important during your first year, find an easy way to reflect and get your thoughts down. These are the things that you will soon forget, but at the end of the year, as you begin to plan for the next year, you can go back to them, reread them, and grow from there (**R28, R30**).

### **Know Thyself**

The second key, after safety, that Coyle (2018) discusses is the idea of vulnerability. A leader has to make people feel ok to be vulnerable, be open about needing help, and knowing their weaknesses. This is essential for our work as principals. Each of us will come into this job with a leadership style. We will have certain strengths and certain weaknesses. We have to be honest with both ourselves and with others about these things. We have to be open to finding help for covering our weaknesses and leaning on others to help make us better as a whole.

For example, as a leader, I am good at seeing the big picture. I can make connections quickly and see where we are headed before most, but I also can have a tendency to get lost in the details. While I know they are essential, some of the day to day details are more difficult for me to want to do and are much more taxing on me. For example, I know that every building needs a master schedule, and a schedule for knowing who will be covering things such as recess and lunch, but I would almost rather be



subjected to intense punishment than to have to build these things, and because of this, I also have a tendency to overlook aspects and to make mistakes. I need help with these areas. To address this, I have solicited feedback and reached out to those who have a knack for schedule making. I try to be open and honest with my deficiency and to ask for help, and so far the end result has been a schedule that is better for everyone and has helped to build a culture of shared leadership, and a sense that it was ok to ask for help

One piece of this is to create a process to ask for and receive constructive feedback from your staff. Principal C describes it this way, “When I first became a principal, I probably wouldn’t have been brave enough to do this, but I wish I had. After my second or third year, I built an anonymous, short survey which I sent to my staff each semester. In it, I asked questions about how they felt. I asked about everything from how they felt about our direction, my communication, and if they felt they had a voice. I used a combination of Likert scale questions and more open-ended comments. They aren’t always fun to read, and there are always a few which I have to remind myself to take with a grain of salt, but if I see a trend or a piece that I know rings true, I am able to use it to better both myself and our school. This process truly did make me a better leader.” It’s not always going to be pleasant, but if we expect our teachers to listen to our feedback and to grow, we have to be ready to do the same **(INV29)**.

When you have a sense of your mission and your “why”, and when you lead with both your strength and weaknesses in mind, you will ultimately create an environment which allows for others to do the same. You don’t need to be everything to everyone, and this realization can be freeing. Utilize the collective strengths of your building and together you will be able to achieve more, but this begins with knowing yourself.

## Lead Learner

In his book *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*, Fullan (2014) makes the case for the importance of a principal being the “lead learner” in their building. Schools are learning institutions, and it shouldn’t be only the students who are learning. Obviously, the first learning that you will have to do is to learn about the school, but it is also important to begin by communicating out your learning. Share your philosophies, your feelings, and your own growth. Share what you are reading, thinking, and listening to. The first things you communicate out to everyone will set expectations and a tone for your time as the principal. Showing that you value learning helps to create a climate of growth for everyone in the building.

Think about a plan for ensuring your own learning and your own growth. When asked about what advice they would give a new principal, both Principal B and Principal D mentioned this. Principal D said, “Immediately start building a professional learning network (PLN). This can be other principals in your district, your supervisor, or people outside of your district. Look on social media, Twitter for one has been huge for me, but find others who are in it with you and from whom you can learn and talk with. It’s a lonely job, so be sure to find others.” Principal B was also focused on knowing the situation in the building you are entering. She told me, “When I came to my current school, I was able to connect with the principal who was leaving. We talked and met on a regular basis. Their insight was huge, and I learned so much and avoided so many mistakes just by talking with them. Reach out to this person, if possible, because they will understand the role better than anyone else in the world.” Whether it’s the former

principal, other principals, or your supervisors, be thinking about who is in your personal support network and continue to foster these relationships (**INV27**).

In her book *Realizing the Power of Professional Learning*, Timperly (2011) asks education leaders the question of “who is in your class?”. Her idea is to get principals and all educators to think about the fact that to create an institution that values learning, each educator should both have a class and be in a class. This means that as the principal, you must think about how you are going to grow and develop each of your “students”, your staff, in the same way in which you ask them to grow their students. We have to have goals and objectives for their learning, and we, as principals, must continue learning and growing ourselves so that we can stay one step ahead and can determine the path down which we will all be heading (**V1, R21, R22, R31**).

So much of our job is about creating a culture. Part of this must be creating a culture that values growth. In schools, this means creating a building in which everyone is focused on learning. As the leader of the building, it is essential that you set yourself as the lead learner and model this learning for the entire staff.

### **Self-Care**

In this job, you can’t avoid it. In fact, I am sure you are already feeling it. The “it” that I am talking about is stress. This job is stressful. There is a seemingly endless amount of things to do. There are expectations of you coming from all angles, from parents, staff, students, and even supervisors. There are long hours, evening events, and more emails than you could have imagined. With all of this, the question isn’t “if” there will be stress, but what to do when it comes. There where many things that each

principal had in common with regards to their thoughts and advice, but other than the importance of relationships, there was only one thing that everyone mentioned and emphasized over and over: self-care.

In the field of education, the idea of self-care has seen an explosion recently. There has been a lot of talk about finding balance, and remembering to take time for yourself. However, there was one thing about a lot of this literature that I found quite interesting. It always seemed to come with a to-do list. The list would generally be pretty similar, eat well, exercise, try mindfulness, maybe do yoga, spend time with your family, and on and on. It started to feel to me that taking care of myself became yet another task that I HAD to do. I was becoming stressed about the fact that I was supposed to be doing all these things to not be stressed.

About this time, I read an article in the *New York Times* by Brad Stulberg (2017). Stulberg argues that maybe what we actually need is a little bit less balance in our lives. He makes that case that we really need is more self-awareness. We need to be more aware of what we are excited about doing and what we really love to do, and find time for doing that. If you love to exercise, find time to do that. If you love to read, find time to do that. If you love your job, there is nothing wrong with being a bit unbalanced, just make sure you stay excited and passionate about it.

When asked about the struggle to find balance, Principal B shared these insights, “Look, I have kids. My life is crazy. But, I love my job, and I love my kids. In some ways, I just had to accept and embrace the craziness. I am open with my staff about it, and I have found that many of them appreciate the fact that I talk about it because they

are feeling it as well. The truth is that there are times when being mom will interrupt being principal. I may get a call from school that one of my kids is sick, and I will have to leave for example, but there are also many times where being principal will interrupt being mom. I talk to my kids about it because I want them to understand that what I do matters and is important to me. I want them to see this, hopefully, and understand, and then maybe, they will find something they care about as adults also. It may just be a rationalization, but when I accepted this, it allowed me to relax at least a little bit.”

I have taken this more to heart. I love my job, but there are things about my job that I don’t love doing. I have to do them, but they don’t have to take up all my time or all of my thoughts. During my workday, one of my favorite things to do is to go to kindergarten during their end of the day, unstructured free-time. I love to watch and listen to their thinking, playing, and creating. The time flies, and taking this time with our youngest students reminds me why I do this work. One thing that has really helped me with making sure I have time for these joys is to schedule them. It can be easy to prioritize other seemingly more important tasks, but finding time for these joys will give you more energy and will ultimately make you more productive in the long run. Put them in your calendar and don’t allow yourself to cancel or schedule other things on top of them. Make it a priority.

## **VIII. Getting Started**

In this paper, there is a lot of information. Included in this are strategies and plans that if you were to follow, you would meet all of the 32 competencies listed by the State of Missouri as being essential for all Emerging Principals and then some. The truth,

however, is that you can't do them all at once. So what are the first things that need to be done as soon as possible? Below is a bulleted list of those things that you need to do sooner rather than later. This section is a reminder, and this paper is something that we hope you will return to time and time again as you look for ideas for what to do, but for now, start with this list and some of the ideas you just read.

- Plan to Meet Staff – could be individual and/or group activity
- Plan Events to Meet with Families – Ice cream social, home visits, etc. – multiple events can also be helpful
- Plan for Student Relationships – plan for first week, large groups, small groups, office visits throughout the year
- Meet with District Admin – HR, Curriculum, Facilities, Finance
- Meet with Supervisor – Do this early and do this often
- Plan for First Staff Meeting – The day staff reports is YOUR first day of school
- Plan for First Day of School – Do not have any meetings on this day: block out your schedule. Get students in, get them fed, and get them home
- Plan for First Week – Recess/Lunch duty, assembly, first PLC, etc.
- Create a Time Management Plan – How will you set your calendar? Who can set meeting with/for you? Give assistant permission to set and edit calendar?
- Schedule Big Rocks – Put all school events, district meetings, etc. on your calendar so that everything else can be scheduled around them.

- Include Reflection Time in Your Day – Set a time for you to gather your thoughts and to reflect. Put it in your calendar and stick to it.
- Create a plan for Shared Leadership – What committees will you have and how often will you meet. Put the dates in your calendar as soon as possible

## **IX. Conclusion**

Being a principal is hard. Being a principal can be lonely. There is only one principal in the building, and this fact can create a feeling of being on an island. This feeling is never more obvious than during one's first year as a principal. But, the opportunity to work with kids, teachers, and families to impact lives and communities for the better is a calling that leads people to this profession. It comes with the power to influence hundreds and maybe even thousands of lives. There's the opportunity to make a difference in ways that won't truly be understood for years to come. But first, it is important to get off to a great start. I have now been a new principal in two different schools. I have had the opportunity to learn from making many mistakes, and while I know I will continue to make mistakes, I also know that if I follow the three S's (systems, stakeholders, and self) the mistakes will be but tiny bumps on a journey that will bring much joy and accomplishment.

Having a framework, learning from others, and starting strong has never been more important. Principals are leaving their schools in droves, and it is having a harmful impact on our schools. Programs such as Missouri's MLDS have shown early success in helping to support principals and keep them in their roles, and we need to expand the

impact of this type of support. The Three S Framework provides insights, examples, and stories from experienced principals which are designed to provide a similar type of situation support, but in a format that doesn't require a principal to leave their building. I encourage anyone who picks this up to use the pieces that speak to them, make their own connections, and find a way to build off of this work. Then finally, I hope everyone will share his or her stories (both the successes and the failures) so that others can learn from them as well.

Each journey will be unique. It will come with its own ups and downs, but it is also important to remember that no principal is alone. Every principal in the world was once a new principal. We are here for any who may need us, but as we believe in all of their ability to be great!!

## **X. Appendices**

### **Appendix A – Research Methods**

#### ***Appendix A.1 - Process Overview***

In this work, I have used a qualitative research approach to examine the prior experiences of five current, experienced principals, including my own. I began by interviewing a diverse group of principals about their experiences as new principals. Our interviews were conversational and general in nature. The focus of the interviews was to discuss the shared experiences of be a new principal in a school. In this context, the word “new” had dual meanings. “New” meant both never having been a principal before, and it also meant joining a “new” school as an experienced principal, but being “new” to the building. Using this dual meaning allowed for us to discuss what was learned from the



first experience being new and how this led to changes in practices when joining a new school.

In another aspect that was unique to this paper, I also included my own experiences having twice been a new principal. Using my own experiences allows for me to explain my connections to the experiences and stories of the others' and to act as a guide for making these connections that then can help another new principal make the same connections.

Upon analyzing the materials, the interviews, and the stories of experienced principals, I then worked the material into a framework that retold our stories by focusing on the ways in which they relate to each of the components of the MLDS which covers all aspects of a principal's role, and specifically focused on the Emerging Level Competencies (Rutherford, Gregory, Katnik, & Shellinger, 2016). Given that it is impossible to know when any new principal will be hired or will be facing certain issues throughout their first year, the restorying for this paper was not done in a chronological format, but is done by connecting the stories to themes which address the needs of new principals. It is not one long story, but multiple, smaller stories used to provide examples and evidence of individual pieces and practices. This restorying allows for the reader to connect with and interpret meaning which can be directly applicable to the context of any new principal, and ultimately help them find ways to both survive and thrive.

In order to make the material easier to understand and to connect with, I used a particular mnemonic device into which all of the Emerging Level Competencies (Image 4) are woven. The Emerging Level consists of the five categories (visionary, instructional, managerial, relational, innovative) of a leader, and it contains thirty-two

competencies. Trying to remember these and to connect with them is difficult due to the sheer number of them, so upon writing this, I combined them into three overarching themes which are easier to relate and connect to. I referred to these themes as the 3 S's. They are systems, stakeholders, and self. Each of the other components can fit within these, and the use of alliteration makes them easier to remember (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012).

Given the importance of connecting the examples and stories to a proven framework, the MLDS framework, I have worked to ensure that each competency is covered in the material. In order to make this clear, I have labeled each competency when it is covered in the writing. Each competency will be labeled using the first letter of the leadership category and the corresponding number from the list of Emerging Principal Competencies (image 4). For example, *Visionary Leader: Competency 2: Examines how the mission, vision, and core values are communicated to, and supported by, stakeholders*, will be labeled in the findings below as (V2). In order to avoid confusion considering that both Instructional and Innovative start with I, Innovative will be labeled using the following letters: INV.

Throughout the paper, I will use the titles listed above (Principal A, B, etc) to refer to all quotes or stories which came from other principals and to ensure their anonymity. Anything that is in relation to my own experience will be stated using first-person language such as "I", "we", "me", "my", etc. If the writing were to be shared on a large scale, I would replace their names with a pseudonym so as to make the reading of the paper more fluent.

**The Qualitative Approach.** Maya Angelou is widely quoted as having said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel” (*Booth & Hachiya, 2004*). The purpose of this paper is to share stories and information that will help new principals learn and be successful in their transition into the job. The goal is to build on the pieces of successful new principal development programs, and to share the stories of previous principals from their own transition experiences in such a way as to elicit connections and feelings for new principals who are currently in the process of transitioning in a way that will stay with them and help guide their practice in ways that quantitative papers may not.

When considering qualitative designs, there is a wide selection of qualitative approaches and design types (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007) from which to choose. When making this decision it is important to remember that the research I am doing involves thinking and asking about events over a period of time, a principal’s first year on the job. It also involves, thinking about one’s life experiences and how they unfolded over a period of time. Upon analyzing a handful of different qualitative approaches, I determined that a narrative qualitative design would best meet my needs (Cresswell et al., 2007)

**Narrative Qualitative Design.** Narrative research may have several forms, but essentially it can be described as a text or discourse with a specific focus on the stories that individuals tell (Cresswell et al, 2007). Cresswell, et al (2007) defines narrative design as “a specific type of qualitative design that is written to be understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (p. 240). They then go on to describe the process for conducting narrative research as studying one or more individuals through the gathering of their stories and then reporting their stories through a sequence based format that can be used to order and determine meaning and shared ideas.

Narratives are best suited for times when stories can be used to better understand a problem or a unique situation. For me, this would be determining strategies and patterns that principals have used to navigate their transition into being a new principal. Narratives may take on many forms including certain familiar methods such as the biography or the autobiography (Cresswell et al, 2007). Narratives can also have a specific contextual structure, such as the experiences of new principals, and may have a guiding perspective or learning lens. The information that is gathered is generally done through interviews or by observing the subjects within a given context (Cresswell et al., 2007). For my purposes, I interviewed educators who have experienced being a new principal and then worked to craft their answers into themes and stories about what worked well and what they would do differently if provided with the opportunity.

When conducting narrative research, one would conduct interviews and collect stories that will relate to a certain, common experience, in my case, this would be the fact that all of the interviewees had previously been a new principal in a school. These stories

then become the field texts that were used as the raw data for the research. Once these stories are collected, it becomes essential that they be organized into a format that will allow for them to be analyzed. In a narrative research approach, this process for analyzing the material is done by situating individual stories into a certain context and then retelling the stories of the subjects through this context. This idea of retelling stories to place them with a certain context and order is referred to as a “restory”. Restorying is the process of gathering stories, analyzing them for key pieces or common themes, and then rewriting them to place them within a certain sequence (Cresswell et al., 2007), in the case of this work, the sequence was organized around the 3 S’s, and the stories used were directly applicable to this system.

**Research Participants.** In putting together this study, I looked for a small, but diverse group of five principals. I prioritized veteran (more than 3 years of experience) principals who had served as a principal new to a school on more than one occasion, but did include one principal who was in his second year to provide the viewpoint of someone who had recently just completed their first year. I ensured those that would be interviewed came from a variety of backgrounds and had served in a variety of schools: suburban, urban, rural and both as part of larger districts and as part of smaller districts. This included 3 male principals, two African-American and one white, and two female principals, both of who are white. See below for the more information on each candidate:

- Principal A – Black male, 2 years as a principal, large district, urban setting
- Principal B – White female, 11 years as a principal at two schools, one rural school in a small district, other in a suburban school in a large district

- Principal C – White female, 9 years as a principal at two school, both schools in a large suburban setting
- Principal D – Black male, 7 years as a principal at two schools, one urban school in a large district, other in a suburban school in a small district
- Principal E (Myself) – White male, 7 years as a principal at two schools, one suburban school in a large district, other in a suburban school in a small district

## **Appendix A.2 – Interview Questions**

### Experienced Principal Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a little about yourself and your journey through education. Including how you became an educator, what all roles have you filled as an educator, and where all have you been employed
2. What made you decide to become an administrator?
3. Please describe the school where you first became a principal.
4. When were you hired, and can you please describe what the interview and hiring process was like?
5. As you think back to first being hired, do you recall where you started and what you did first?
6. What was the best thing you did when you first hired?
7. What strategies did you use for getting to know the stakeholders in your school community and how did you go about building relationships?
8. Making tough decisions is a key part of being a principal, what processes do you use to help you make tough decisions?

9. How did you manage getting to know how your new building ran and what systems were in place for “making sure the trains run on time”?
10. Was your school in a large district or a small district? What challenges did you notice in getting to know your role in the district and how did the size of the district impact your school?
11. What types of strategies do you take to ensure self-care is a part of what you do?
12. Are there any ideas or approaches you have used to help you to get to know and build relationships with all of your students?
13. How would you describe yourself as a leader, and how do you think others would describe your leadership style?
14. If you were to get the chance to re-do your first year as a new principal, is there anything you would have done differently? If so, what would that be?
15. If you were to offer advice to a new principal, what would you tell them?
16. You have been a new principal in more than one building, tell me about the second school.
17. When you were hired, did you do anything differently the second time that you didn't do the first time?

**Appendix B – Missouri Leadership Development System - Images and Graphics*****Appendix B.1 – Image - Transformational Principal Categories*****The Transformational Principal is...**

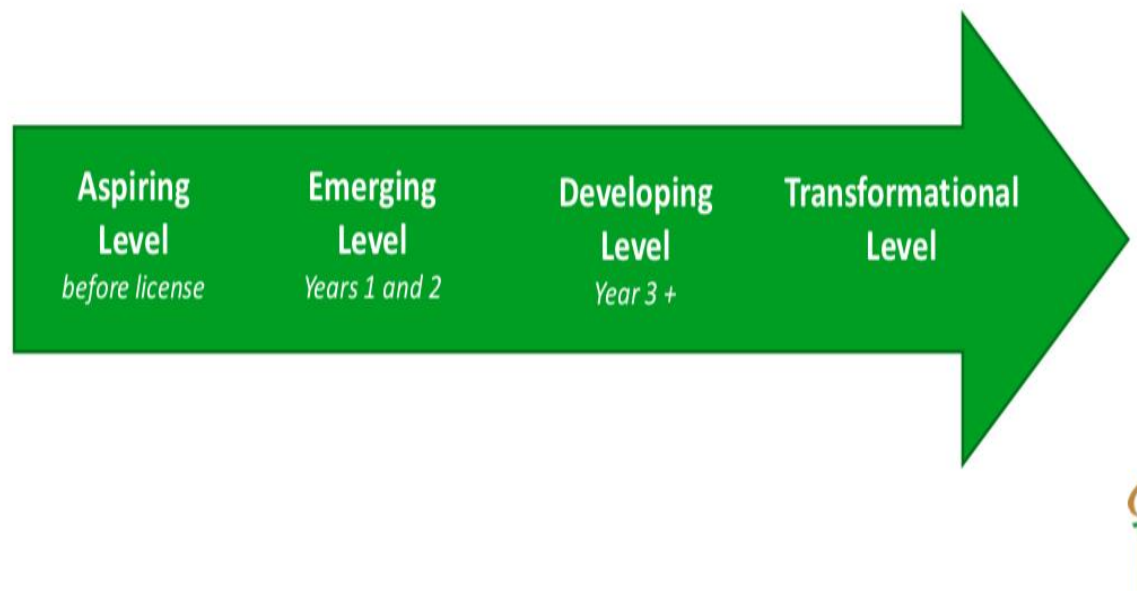


*Appendix B.2 – Image – Intentional Capacity Building Chart*

## MLDS – Intentional Capacity Building

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Progressive system of support and training for school principals



*Appendix B.3 – Image – Learning Progression Example*

The **Principal** as the **Instructional Leader** ensures a guaranteed and viable curriculum.

<b>Leadership Competency #4</b> —Engages and supports staff to vertically and horizontally align curriculum to state/district standards (PSEL 4a,b;6d; 9i;10a,e)			
<b>Aspiring Leader</b>	<b>Emerging Leader</b>	<b>Developing Leader</b>	<b>Transformational Leader</b>
Understands standards as they apply to horizontal and vertical alignment of local curricula and content areas.	Examines and becomes familiar with the existing curriculum and learning standards.	Facilitates staff discussions to ensure curriculum is comprehensive, rigorous, aligned, and engaging and supports continuity and fidelity across all grades and content areas.	Ensures staff regularly collaborates to continuously monitor and adjust the vertical and horizontal alignment of the curriculum to improve student learning.
The <b>Distinguished Transformational Leader</b> coaches, trains and/or mentors others in how to ensure a guaranteed and viable curriculum.			

**Appendix B.4 – Emerging Level Competencies Graphic and Codings**

The Emerging Principal	
<b>Visionary Leader at the emerging level...</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examines and begins to understand the existing core values and culture of the school and how it connects to the mission and vision (PSEL 1a,b,d,e; 5f; 7c; 10c)</li> <li>Examines how the mission, vision and core values are communicated to, and supported by, stakeholders (PSEL 1c,d,f,g; 5f; 8c,h; 9l)</li> <li>Examines the sources of data used to evaluate the existing mission, vision and core values (PSEL 1d,e; 4a; 6e; 9a; 10a,b,g)</li> </ol>
<b>Instructional Leader at the emerging level...</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examines and becomes familiar with the existing curriculum and learning standards (PSEL 4a,b; 6d; 9i; 10a,e)</li> <li>Identifies existing instructional practices and reinforces those that are appropriate to the learning content (PSEL 2b; 4b,c,d,e; 6d,e; 10a,f)</li> <li>Observes classroom instruction and provides meaningful and timely feedback to build teacher practice and student response (PSEL 2b; 4b,d; 6a,e,f; 10c,e,f)</li> <li>Assesses teachers' understanding and use of formative and summative assessments and their relationship to student learning (PSEL 4a,b,f; 6d)</li> <li>Assesses current teacher analysis of student level data for improving the instructional process (PSEL 2c; 3a; 4b,g; 6e; 7g; 9g; 10a,c,e,g,h)</li> <li>Uses data from multiple sources to identify strengths and needs for professional learning (PSEL 6a,c,d,f,h; 7a,f,g,h; 10a,e,f,g)</li> </ol>
<b>Managerial Leader at the emerging level...</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analyzes the immediate and long-term needs for building and sustaining a safe and functional school (PSEL 2a; 5a,c; 8g; 9e; 10h)</li> <li>Analyzes routines, instruction, procedures, schedules and use of technology for building and sustaining a safe, healthy, orderly and compliant learning environment (PSEL 3d,e; 5a,c,e; 9a,e,f,h,j; 10a)</li> <li>Analyzes personnel to determine areas of strength and need (PSEL 6a,b; 9b; 10a)</li> <li>Determines the effectiveness of existing expectations, guidelines and procedures (PSEL 2a,d,f; 4a; 7a,c; 9b,h; 10a,f)</li> <li>Assesses and reviews data to determine appropriate interventions and support for personnel (PSEL 6a,b,c,h; 9k; 10f)</li> <li>Understands and complies with district, state and federal requirements for records and reporting (PSEL 9h)</li> <li>Assesses how current fiscal resources comply with statutory and district requirements and support school goals and priorities (PSEL 2a; 5c; 8j; 9a,b,c,d,h)</li> <li>Assesses how current non-fiscal resources comply with statutory and district requirements and support school goals and priorities (PSEL 2a; 5c; 8j; 9a,b,c,d,h)</li> </ol>
<b>Relational Leader at the emerging level</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Determines the extent of diversity in the school based on ethnicity, gender, economic background, etc. (PSEL 1c; 2d,e; 3a,b,c,e,f; 4a; 5b; 7b,d; 10a,c)</li> <li>Determines how resources and strategies in the school community are used for addressing the overall well-being of each student (PSEL 2c,e,f; 3a,b,c,d,f,h; 5b; 8e,g,i; 10a)</li> <li>Builds relationships with students and establishes high expectations for behavior and learning to promote a positive culture (PSEL 2e; 3a,b,d; 5b,d,e)</li> <li>Intentionally and ethically interacts with staff by being visible, accessible and approachable (PSEL 2a,e,f; 7e; 9j)</li> <li>Analyzes the culture of support and respect among staff and determines strengths and opportunities for improvement (PSEL 2b,d,e,f; 3g,h; 6h; 7a,b,c,d,e,g; 9k; 10a,d,f)</li> <li>Identifies potential teacher leaders (PSEL 6g; 7b,d,h; 10a,e,i)</li> <li>Creates formal and informal opportunities to interact with families (PSEL 2d; 3a,h; 5d,f; 8a,b,c,d,g; 10a)</li> <li>Identifies key stakeholders in the community and begins to build relationships (PSEL 3f; 5d,f; 8a,b,c,d,f,g,j; 10c)</li> </ol>
<b>Innovative Leader at the emerging level...</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Observes and gathers knowledge, skills and best practices relevant to teaching and learning in the school (PSEL 4c,e; 6f; 10a,c,f,i)</li> <li>Engages in professional networks to expand relationships and generate avenues for new knowledge and understanding (PSEL 6i; 10g)</li> <li>Begins reflecting on experiences of being a new principal, including personal strengths and weaknesses, and takes some action to grow and develop (PSEL 2b; 6i; 10c,g,h)</li> <li>Demonstrates receptivity and generates a plan for receiving constructive feedback from others (PSEL 6i; 10c,g,h)</li> <li>Begins applying time management practices to allow focus on the school's highest priorities (PSEL 6i)</li> <li>Acts in accordance with the belief that a principal's primary role is to promote student learning (PSEL 2a; 3g,h; 7f; 8h; 9f; 10d,i)</li> <li>Explores existing circumstances related to student learning &amp; considers possible areas for change (PSEL 2b; 3f; 7f; 8j; 9f; 10d,e,i)</li> </ol>

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